JUST LIKE THE ONE I USED TO KNOW
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Psalm 85
Mark 1:1-8
Isaiah 40:1-5, 11

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God."
Isaiah 40:3 (NRSV)

In these busiest of days, when some of us are happy and others are lonely, we come here—we come back here—to be together and to be with you, you who are our safe haven, our home. Startle us with the truth of the old story of your surprising love: in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The most popular song ever written, I learned recently, is "White Christmas." It has been recorded more, sung and played more, listened to more, than any music ever. I'll bet if I started, we could make our way through it to the end, even without the choir's help.

> I'm dreaming of a white Christmas
> Just like the ones I used to know. . . .

It's that line that get us, I think, that transports us back in memory. Irving Berlin wrote it in 1941 and knew immediately that he had created something special. In fact, when he met with his colleagues the morning after he wrote "White Christmas," he reportedly said, "Fellas, I just wrote the best song in the history of the world."

It was very popular during World War II when so many young Americans were separated from their families and living and fighting in difficult, dangerous circumstances far from home. And whether or not an actual white Christmas is part of your personal history, my guess is that the lyrics "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones I used to know" in some way evoke a little nostalgia in your soul and evoke thoughts and memories of home, wherever that was.

It's amazing how much of home we carry around with us, deeply stored in memory but always ready to be called into serviceable awareness.

In a workshop once on faith and personality formulation, I was asked to draw on newsprint a floor plan of the first home I could remember. There were about thirty of us—ministers, priests, and nuns—and it was amazing how much we could remember. Everyone, including me, was surprised at how much detail we retained: the kitchen table where meals were eaten, the dining room where holiday celebrations took place, the living room with the radio and overstuffed chair, the warm radiators that felt so good on cold mornings. It's all in there, and it's all part of who we are today.

In his book *The Longing for Home,* Frederick Buechner remembers his grandparents' grand home in Pittsburgh where he and his mother and brother lived for a while after the trauma of his father's suicide. Buechner recalls the library with rows of books, the parlor, the portraits, the large moose head on the wall, and "the smell of that house I remember best" he writes, "was the smell of cooking apple sauce"(p. 9). One of the delights of my life is to step off the elevator in our building and be hit with the wonderful aroma of a pot roast cooking in the apartment next to ours. It happens fairly often and every time it does, I am transported a half-century and 550 miles away to my mother's kitchen. Buechner says the older we get, the more we find ourselves remembering one particular home—the home we knew and will always be homesick for.

Even if we did not have such a home, we still long for a place that belongs to us and where we belong. Homesickness seems to be built into us.

Think of the music

"When Johnny comes marching home again."
"I'll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams."
"There's no place like home for the holidays."
"Sweet home, Chicago."
"Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home."

That song was sung originally by people forcibly and violently torn from their homes and villages in West Africa, transported in crowded, filthy ships into slavery in the United States. A people who, incredibly, accepted the religion of their oppressors as their own and refined it, made it a far better religion, by remembering their actual home and their ultimate home in a God who never forgets about anyone; a God whose gracious love and mercy extends to every man, woman, and child; a God who, at the end of the day, welcomes all the exiles, all the wanderers, all the lost, all the captive, home again.

If you get there before I do
Tell all-a my friends I'm
Comin' along too

Comin’ for to carry me Home.

Six centuries before Christ, the worst thing that could happen to a nation happened to God’s people. Engaged in a war with the most powerful nation in the world, their armies were defeated and pushed all the way back to the capital city of Jerusalem by the overwhelming superiority and sophistication of Babylon. A long siege took place and finally collapse. The city’s walls were breached, the city overrun. And then, as always happens, the looting, pillaging, killing. Curiously, the Babylonians called a halt to that: leveled the city to be sure, paying particular attention to see that every single wall of the precious Temple of Solomon— Judah’s heart and soul—was destroyed. Then the Babylonians assembled all the leaders, the politicians, priests, lawyers, businesspeople and marched them across the desert to Babylon, where they were kept in captivity for seventy years. It’s called “The Exile,” and during those long years, when a whole generation died and another came of age, the people longed for home, told stores about how it used to be in sweet home Jerusalem, sang songs about home, told the children every night at bedtime about how it used to be in our home. Most difficult of all for them was that in their separation from home, they sensed that they had lost their God, or worse, that God had lost them, had forgotten about them. In terms of biblical literature, it was a time of “great silence,” during which the exiled community experienced abandonment, grief at the end of the world as they had known it, the end of all the old certainties and assumptions. It was a time of deep sadness, and the only thing that kept those people from despair was the thought of home and the hope, faint and remote as it might be, that God had not abandoned them, that God would act to save and redeem them and bring them home. They began to see their redemption in terms of going home. But for seventy years there was a great silence and loneliness.

And then a voice is heard. A prophet, a man of exquisite poetic gifts, arises back in Jerusalem and writes a letter to the exiled community in Babylon. We know his words. We listen to them every Advent season. We hear them in the opening tenor aria of Handel’s *Messiah:* “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God, speak tenderly to Jerusalem. . . . Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

It’s homecoming music. God has not forgotten them. God knows exactly where they are, remembers each of their names, and now they’re going home. It’s an exuberant message. God will lead them home through the dry, arid desert, like a powerful king, with his servants out in front of the great, triumphant homecoming parade, leveling off the hills, smoothing the rough places.

And in the midst of this wonderful announcement, the poet reminds them of the most precious idea of all: God is like a shepherd. God is not fully

described in terms of power and victory, a muscular God who overwhelms all his and the peoples' enemies. No, even more true is that God

> Shall feed his flock like a shepherd:
> he shall gather the lambs with his arms,
> and carry them in his boson, and shall gently lead
> those that are with young.

Precious images of God that we invoke and remember every time we baptize babies.

The theme is homesickness and homecoming and it is, I think, particularly relevant for us this year. Tribune columnist Eric Zorn wrote an editorial last week about a controversy that has emerged around the great Advent hymn we began with this morning, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, which mourns in lonely exile." Some have heard a racial slur in those words sung by Christians. A New York City rabbi wrote that "Jews are not awaiting the advent of a savior to ransom us." And a Christian theologian added, "Whatever Israel is doing right now, it's not mourning in exile!" And I found myself thinking, "Oh, no? Really? Isn't Israel, isn't Palestine living in a peculiarly devastating exile? Aren't the people of Iraq? Aren't the people of America in exile? Haven't we been in a particular exile since September 11, 2001? Aren't we, all of us, for that matter, living far from where we ought to be, and where God wants us to be, these days?

We are, all of us, in some kind of exile, I conclude. Eric Zorn wrote, "We are all still waiting for a better world." Christians as well as Jews; Muslims as well as Jews and Christians. All of us.

It's a particularly relevant word this year, I believe. One of our best thinkers, Walter Brueggemann says that the similarities between the exiled community in the sixth century B.C. and our own situation as Christians in our culture are remarkable. Both they and we have experienced the loss of old certainties and assumptions, "Exile is more than geographical," Bruggemann writes. "Exile is when old securities are gone and that is where we are living these days."

Tragic violence explodes in Bali, Mombassa, Jerusalem, some place new every day, it seems. As American forces prepare for war with Iraq, Al Quaeda claims credit for the Mombassa bombing of a Jewish resort in a clear attempt to create religious hatred and violence, something that people of goodwill, Muslim, Jew, or Christian, must not do. Of course, we are all waiting—if not specifically for Jesus Christ, certainly for a word, a deed, of hopeful love, a word of divine redemption and grace and forgiveness. Of course, we are all in some way far, far from home this year.

“Homesickness,” Barbara Brown Taylor says, is “God’s tug at our hearts, a kind of homing instinct planted in each of us.”

In his book on home, Buechner writes:

> To be homeless the way people like you and me are apt to be homeless is to have homes all over the place but not to be really at home in any of them. To be really at home is to be really at peace, and our lives are so intricately interwoven that there can be no real peace for any of us until there is real peace for all of us. (p. 140)

I think about that every day, every time I walk through the Chestnut Street door and greet the three or four homeless people waiting patiently to see someone from the Social Service Center, to receive a bowl of soup or a warm sweater, or simply a place to sit down and give their weary feet a rest without being hassled, told to move on; a place to use a toilet, a bar of soap, a paper towel. I think about how intricately interwoven our lives all are and that in some way we go home together every Sunday afternoon when I see our homeless guests gather for Sunday night supper—warm food lovingly prepared and served by members of this church and something else as well, something just as important as the food: namely a rare reminder that they matter, that someone remembers that they are children of God and that God knows their names, loves them, and cares for them.

I thought about how intricately interwoven all of our lives are when I saw my friend Joe Ledwell’s picture on the front page of the *Tribune* last Monday. Did you see it? Joe’s a retired Presbyterian minister and a good one. He was previously the pastor of the Homewood Presbyterian Church. For twenty-two years, Joe has helped bury the unclaimed dead of Cook County in a special corner of Homewood Cemetery. Most of us wouldn’t have any idea, but once a month the county buries the unclaimed or unidentified dead, people who are utterly lost and forgotten, a final homelessness.

And one man, Joe, bears witness that even the most thoroughly homeless has a home and that there is a place where he or she is not forgotten, where his or her name is known, a safe and welcoming home.

There are about 20 buried per month, 200 this year so far.
State file #612897: a ninety-two-year-old woman
#612905: a fifty-eight-year-old man

Talk about getting lost. Joe explained to the reporter why he has been going to the cemetery once a month for twenty-two years: “My feeling is that it’s not just important for the dead but for the community to recognize that

there has been a passing, a human being has died. Everyone here had a mother and a father."

What a witness. What an Advent reminder Joe gave us, standing there in his new boots in the mud on a cold November day, reading the Twenty-Third Psalm and a passage from Romans and from the Gospel of John, saying a prayer commending the souls of the dead to God. What a simple gift to be reminded that no matter how far we stray, there is One whose love follows us, One whose mercy holds us close, One who welcomes us home at the end of the day.

That is what we anticipate in Advent. A young couple, a man and a woman heavily pregnant, traveling many miles to return home, and when they arrive, making a home, a birth place in a cow stall, transforming a manger into a home to which we all in some way return.

Fred Buechner remembers how it changed his life and saved his soul. A young writer in New York, trying to make it in the world of publishing and not doing so well, Buechner starting going to church, to the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, and recalls the minister, a fine preacher by the name of George Arthur Buttrick, telling a story on a Sunday near Christmas. As he had been leaving church, Buttrick had overhead someone on the steps asking someone else, "Are you going home for Christmas?" Buechner remembers Buttrick, peering out through his sparkling spectacles at all those people, asking, "Are you going home for Christmas" in a way that brought tears to his eyes and made it almost unnecessary for him to move on to his answer to the question, which was that home, finally, is the manger in Bethlehem, the place where at midnight even the oxen kneel.

Home is where Christ is. The home to which we return, regardless of the geography of the thing; home is there, that simple manger scene where we know we belong, where we know once again the strong, saving news that there is One who loves the world so much as to be born into it, loves the world so much as to never give up on it, loves the world so much as to continue to work for redemption and peace in unexpected and surprising ways. That's where we're headed again this Advent: Home, where we know ourselves to be loved and cared for and never forgotten—and ultimately, fully, safe, whole, at peace. Home.

Amen.